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ABSTRACT

Strategies are presented for recruiting family members from minority groups to be involved in the formation of policies and development of programs that affect their lives and those of their young children with disabilities. Organizational strategies, strategies to empower family members, logistical strategies, and process strategies are presented. Recommended organizational strategies include: fostering an organizational culture that understands the richness of diversity and what it offers to organizations; recognizing family members as assets, not as tokens; and recognizing barriers that inhibit diverse family participation. Suggested strategies to empower family members include: identifying individuals from local communities and supporting their growth as contributors and advocates; providing leadership training for family members; and training providers to work with family members. Among logistical strategies discussed are: holding meetings at community centers; developing innovative strategies to help families overcome transportation barriers; and evaluating child care and reimbursement issues. Recommended process strategies include: using alternative methods of evaluating parent meetings, such as focus groups or sacred circles; ensuring that each individual's participation is a positive and meaningful experience; and scheduling meetings so that working family members can attend. (CR)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD BULLETIN

News by and for Parents and Parent Members of State Interagency Coordinating Councils

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STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING FAMILY MEMBERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS FOR ROLES IN POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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This **Early Childhood Bulletin** *is intended to assist current ICC members and others in their efforts to enroll, recruit, and support families from diverse backgrounds as active vital participants in shaping the policies and programs that affect their lives and those of their children. The recommendations and strategies presented here were gathered from ICC parent members and other parent representatives from across the country through telephone conversations with the author. All those interviewed share the mission of promoting the participation of family members from diverse backgrounds at program and policy levels in local and state Interagency Coordinating Councils and parent resource and support groups.*

Families throughout the United States, are experiencing the obstacles, challenges, and rewards of raising a child or children with disabilities. This experience is not limited to one ethnic or cultural group or to a particular economic or social background. In most of these families, family members devote a lot of time and energy trying to meet the special needs of their children. At the same time, many families may also be confronting additional stresses in meeting their commitments at home, work or in the community. These additional challenges are even more pressing for families who daily confront the effects of poverty, racism, discrimination or the long-time societal results of these conditions. Despite these added challenges, many family members from diverse backgrounds would like to participate in their local and state Interagency Coordinating Councils (ICC) or parent resource and support groups.

At the same time, ICCs and other organizations have expressed a desire and commitment to representing and serving better the diversity of families in the communities they serve. ICCs and organizations providing direct service are recognizing that to meet their commitment they must include families from a diversity of backgrounds as active participants in program and policy development. Diverse representation at these levels is necessary to ensure that service delivery can be individualized to meet the real needs of all families. Diverse perspectives are equally important if progress is to be made in the areas of family-professional collaboration and in the development of community-based services. Yet, despite the critical importance of all these issues to families and professionals committed to the well-being of children and families, ICCs and other organizations are finding it difficult to recruit family members from diverse backgrounds to play a role in program and policy development, and to support their ongoing participation in those roles.

Before listing strategies, it is important to clarify here that "diversity" is defined in its broadest sense in this article. Diversity reflects such variables as education, family status, ethnicity, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, gender, culture, geography, sexual orientation, age, and physical and mental ability. Parents and family members who have children with special needs include: single moms and dads, teen parents, parents with disabilities, foster parents, grandparents, blended families, families who are homeless, immigrant and refugee families...and the list goes on. In addition, societal changes present new challenges; today's society is highly mobile and the extended family structures no longer fulfill their traditional functions.

It is our intention that these suggestions, reflecting many perspectives, will further ICCs and other organizations in their efforts to ensure that multiple, diverse perspectives are represented at all levels of care and program and policy development.

The recommendations and strategies are categorized as follows:

1). **Organizational Strategies:** Steps are taken to ensure that family members participate in the development of policy and procedures that promote inclusion, mutual respect and acceptance of diverse individuals, while re-

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flecting their contributions in the ICCs mission, operation and state/local service delivery system.

2). **Strategies to Empower Family Members:** A supportive and nurturing environment encourages character development, increased self-esteem and development of leadership abilities, and expands the organization's knowledge base of individualized family-centered recruitment practices.

3). **Logistical Strategies:** The ICC or organization promotes flexibility and encourages creativity by organizing and implementing a plan that delineates where and when to have meetings and the supports (such as provision of travel, translators, fees) necessary to allow the participation of families who may require special accommodations.

4). **Process:** Ongoing self-assessment strategies are used to evaluate what is working and to identify the mentoring/orientation activities needed to effectively support and maintain the participation of family members from all types of families and at all levels of participation.

On behalf of all children with special needs and their families, the author and contributors to this article hope this information will be useful to ICCs and other organizations as they work along side of families to meet these many challenges.

Organizational Strategies

- Foster an organizational culture that understands the richness of diversity and what it offers to your organization.
- Recognize family members as assets, not as tokens.
- Ensure that discussions of service systems are meaningful to families by including representatives from agencies that serve families (e.g., social security, health and social services).
- Identify the underrepresented groups within the communities being served and ask: What are we doing with these families? What can we do to assist these family members? Are they really hard to reach or do we need to acquire new skills to reach them? Who is responsible for recruiting diverse family members?
- Recognize barriers that inhibit diverse family participation as support issues that need to be customized.
- Identify and learn from community programs which provide effective services for diverse families.
- Enlist a variety of supports because people are from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Even the playing field for family members by compensating them and supporting their participation.
- Encourage the Governor's office to assign Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) parent members quickly.
- Invite family members to serve as community representatives or service providers.
- Evaluate personnel needs from a provider's and from a family member's perspective.
- Collaborate with established community leaders.
- Hire more bilingual service providers.

Strategies to Empower Family Members

- Identify individuals from local communities and support and nurture their growth as contributors and advocates.
- Provide leadership training for family members.
- Train providers to work with family members and families; include family members as trainers.
- Consider as appropriate the benefits of one-on-one and/or parent-to-parent support for family members.
- Tailor written materials to meet the needs of the readers such as translations into languages other than English, writing in easy to understand language, use of braille and other formats, and provide interpreters as needed at meetings.
- Hold focus groups on aspects of family-centered care, such as family rights, the IFSP/IEP process since some ICCs are birth through five, collaboration with professionals, and ways to support family participation in policy and program development.
- Explain the implications of policy issues so that family members understand their impact and can respond to them.
- Help family members share their stories at meetings and in the media so that they have the desired strategic impact.
- Ask individual family members to share successful strategies they have used to meet challenges and discuss how these strategies might be most valuable to the group.

- Acknowledge the contributions family members have made and help them recognize the difference they can make in the future. Discuss and celebrate contributions and successes.
- Make it easy for family members to learn who the players are, what their roles are in the system, and how they fit into the scheme of things.
- Encourage monolingual family members to learn English, and provide them with materials that are translated into their language, beginning with information on their child's diagnosis.
- Implement mentor programs or buddy systems for family members new to a program, council committee, or activity.
- Invest in family members as experts and leaders by supporting their participation at conferences and workshops where they can acquire information and develop new skills.
- Explore family support resources, such as respite care options, and share this information with family members.
- Develop family and professional mentor programs.
- Providers and family representatives should assist parents in sharing their stories at meetings in strategic ways.
- Develop and disseminate multilingual publications.
- Encourage family members to access Parent Training & Information (PTI) centers and local Family Resource Centers.[1]
- Encourage family members to participate in Partners in Policy Making Leadership Training in their state.[2]

Logistical Strategies

- Hold meetings at community centers, HeadStart sites, the YMCA or YWCA, churches, recreation and parks buildings, and other community-based facilities.
- Develop innovative strategies to help families overcome transportation barriers. For example, one state has rented a car for a family member to attend bimonthly meetings.
- Obtain a waiver that allows family members who receive public assistance to obtain consultant fees from Part H without affecting their income.
- Evaluate child care and reimbursement issues. Is money the issue, or is a competent caregiver needed?
- Make sure that meetings start and finish on time.
- Develop opportunities for ICC families to meet around activities for children, e.g. at a picnic, at a resource fair.
- Provide child care at meetings.
- Give family members an advance instead of reimbursing them for their expenses after they attend a meeting or conference.
- Hire regional family advocates.

Process Strategies

- Use alternative methods of evaluating parent meetings, such as focus groups or sacred circles.
- Identify the resources and strategies needed to enable and encourage family participation.
- Ensure that each individual's participation is a positive and meaningful experience.
- Schedule meetings so that working family members can attend.
- Extend invitations to fathers and significant others.
- Learn about the diverse groups in your communities, be patient and nonjudgemental, and avoid stereotyping.
- Increase personal contacts with family members; for example, follow up meetings with telephone calls and thank-you letters.
- Audit your organization's practices and evaluate how you conduct business:
  a. Identify your mission and values and determine if families share them.
  b. Planning/Clarification – What is family centered? What is family/professional collaboration?
  c. Audit what you do together. Are you walking the talk?
- Build an educational component into every meeting.

[1] For more information about the PTI in a particular state, readers may contact the TAPP Project at the Federation for Children with Special Needs, 95 Berkeley Street, Suite 104, Boston, MA 02116. (617) 482-2915.

[2] For more information, contact their State Council on Developmental Disabilities or the Minnesota Governors Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities at (612) 296-4018 or (612) 296-9962 (TDD).

- Ensure that family members feel valued at meetings.
- Encourage service providers to reach out to family members.
- Provide stipends to family members in a timely manner.
- Appreciate the diversity among individuals and recognize that parent support groups are not for every family member.
- Provide family members with incentives and options that encourage their participation.
- Focus meetings on parenting, child, and community issues, instead of primarily on disabilities.
- Increase family member participation by advertising that meetings are for family members who have children with special health needs (versus disabilities). Many family members see their child's special need differently than others.
- Evaluate what it takes to recruit an individual family member.
- Identify generic problems in recruiting particular groups of people, such as senior citizens, foster parents, and family members with disabilities. Problem areas to assess include:
  - Number of hours spent at meetings;
  - Time spent getting to and from the meeting;
  - Transportation barriers;
  - Scheduling of the meeting; and,
  - Safety and accessibility issues.
- Develop meeting minutes in the form of an action plan with next steps specified.
- Find out and build on family member's needs, concerns, expectations, hopes, and strengths.
- Send family members a personalized recruitment letter that identifies your organization's mission and goals.
- Evaluate how to sustain the interests of family members, particularly as their children grow and changes occur.
- When family members express an interest to participate, follow-up quickly.
- Work with tribes and various tracking teams on reservations.

ANNOUNCING

Training and Technical Assistance to Parents Serving on State Interagency Coordinating Councils

Mentoring

peer consultation and advice from parents and professionals

Training

correspondence courses on ICC and early intervention topics and leadership skills

Telephone Consultation

a toll-free number for ICC parents for information, consultation and referral

Annual Leadership Institute

for teams of ICC parents from selected states

For more information contact: Evelyn Haussiein or Glenn Gabbard, Federation for Children with Special Needs, 95 Berkeley Street, Suite104, Boston, MA 02116, (800) 346-3276

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